Applying MOST at the Organizational Level: Findings from Four Case Studies

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Chapter 1
Background

MOST, the management and organizational sustainability tool, is a structured exercise to support organizational self-assessment of the level of development of key management components. Developed by MSH, MOST has been used by different types of organizations to set management development priorities, strengthen the group focus on organizational change, and as a supporting element in overall organizational planning. It has been used as a stand-alone one-time exercise and, as well, as a recurrent exercise in the context of a broader strategy of organizational development.

Much has been learned about the potential uses and limitations of MOST but until the present, those "lessons" have not been systematically described and shared. **To progress in this effort, the Management and Leadership (M&L) Project of MSH conducted four systematic studies of MOST applications in a variety of settings that range from single service delivery settings, to NGO systems involving many different organizations, and public programs in multiple settings.[1] Based on qualitative information obtained through semi-structured focus groups and interviews, these studies provide a rich source of perceptions and insights by those that have been associated with, and affected by, the MOST process in the field.**

The objectives of the case studies were:
- **to document the MOST implementation process across four different settings, focusing in particular on contextual issues, responses to the various implementation phases and perceived overall effects of the MOST experience.**
- **to identify information that could improve the effectiveness and support provided by the existing facilitator's guide.**

The remainder of this chapter provides a brief overview of the main characteristics of MOST and how they potentially affect its use. Chapter 2 summarizes the main findings from the four case studies with respect to themes used to organize the individual studies. Chapter 3 links these findings to a set of key issues relating to the use of MOST from a strategic and an operational perspective and makes recommendation that have the potential for strengthening the effectiveness of the tool.

1.1. The MOST Tool and Process—Key Characteristics

1.1.1. Conceptual Framework

As noted above, MOST, the management and organizational sustainability tool, is a structured exercise to support organizational self-assessment of the level of development

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[1] The cases selected include only MOST implementations that have been conducted directly under auspices of M&L since 2000.

of key management components. The management components relate to four general areas; Mission, Strategy, Structure, and Systems. For purposes of the assessment, the four general areas are divided into 13 components, each of which is explored and assessed during the MOST exercise. While many different management assessment tools are available, MOST reflects a particular set of ideas related to how organizations develop and, how the staff of the organization can draw on their own experience to develop a collective sense of organizational performance and how it can be improved.

The notion of "level of development" reflects the view that organizations develop along a continuum that starts with rudimentary structure and practices that need to be developed if the organization is to be successful. In the course of operations, organizations may demonstrate progress in some areas and retrogression in others. The continuum works in both directions. For each management component, 4 stages are described. Although numbered 1 (least developed) through 4 (most developed), the numbers only denote ordinal relationships. This means that "scores" cannot be added, averaged, or otherwise used to measure aspects of performance.

For each stage of component development, the MOST instrument describes a set of characteristics that are indicative of each level of development. These characteristics are specific to the particular component and are designed to support group specification of indicators that reflect where the organization is on the continuum of development.[2] Once the current indicators are specified, MOST focuses the group effort on identifying target indicators that can be the objectives for improvement in an organization action plan.

1.1.2. Participant generated indicators

Almost all participants in MOST emphasize that developing the indicators is the most challenging part of the exercise. Originally, MOST was intended to be indicator driven and used both internally and externally as a way of assessing management development. The indicators would be generally applicable to specific management components in specific types of settings. As the tool evolved, the challenge focused more on having participants specify indicators for the organization's current status that could serve as a basis for identifying targets that would demonstrate improvement. The critical objective became specifying an indicator that reflects the current stage of development for at least one aspect of the component and building an action plan that will result in specific improvement in the indicator. For many participants, this effort proves quite challenging.

The process builds up from the general characteristics that are spelled out for each stage of each component. When it is felt that the descriptions for stage 2 in financial management reflects the current status in the organization, an indicator is specified that provides evidence for the scoring. The indicator would be a specific observation (e.g. our financial office takes over a month to pay our local suppliers.) that would validate the placement on the development continuum. Improvement is described by a target

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[2] The use of the term "indicators" has been the topic of extensive discussion. In MOST, the phrase means a specific observable fact that supports the group judgment for ordinal placement. The target indicators represent "better" indicators that the group believes can be reached with effective organizational actions.

indicator that is an improvement over the current status. (e.g. more than half of our suppliers are paid within 7 business days.)

The drive for specificity in the indicators is quite challenging. However, many participants in the cases indicated that the real learning started when they got serious about the indicators. They all described it as hard but rewarding.

1.1.3. Participants as sources of information

In general, the MOST exercise builds its consensus from the knowledge embodied in the group of participants. Although MOST has often been used in conjunction with other data acquisition activities (interviews, outside evaluators, etc.) the process itself builds entirely from the collective knowledge of the participants. The operating assumption is that every individual working in an organization has some knowledge of how it actually works. Additionally, no one individual has all of that information. By incorporating a broad base of participation, the workshop is directed at activities that "pool" the knowledge and experiences of each individual into a shared body of knowledge about how the organization is operating. This strategy validates the individuals and develops a strong collective focus among participants.

The structure of the MOST exercise is designed to support both the full participation of staff from throughout the organization and the development in the group of a shared set of knowledge about how the organization is working and where it stands with respect to each of the management components. The exercise begins with a discussion of the components after which participants are asked to start the process by indicating, based on their own experience, how the organization is doing with respect to each. They are also asked to describe an indicator that others could see that supports their placement. After individuals declare themselves, they form small groups and begin to process the information together.

1.1.4. Consensus without competition

In many group processes, the idea of consensus is ultimately agreeing on one of a number of competing ideas. The object is to find an idea which all can accept. The MOST process has an entirely different focus. Rather than seeing each individual's view of the organization as competing, MOST starts from the view that no one has a full knowledge of the organization. At the same time, the views possessed by each participant may be limited but are not incorrect. The workshop is structured to support the sharing of different views and experiences and building out of these diverse contributions a more valid and comprehensive shared view of the current status of management development of the organization.

At the start, working alone, each participant goes through the entire set of components and development stages and carries out an individual assessment. Many difficulties present themselves including inadequate knowledge of this set of the organizations activities, too little direct experience with other parts of the organization, etc. Starting

from their individual assessments, participants are placed into small groups (3-5) where they first record their scores and then begin discussion. This is where the knowledge pooling begins. If members of the group vary widely in their rankings (which is often the case for some of the systems), the discussion focuses on the indicators (What is it that you could show someone to support placing our organization in stage 2?) When the small groups have reached a shared opinion about ranking and indicators, each group posts its decisions for the other participants to see. From this point, the small groups work in plenary to develop the overall group "consensus."

While an oversimplified version of the actual exercise, this mindset does drive the process. A participant may start by saying, "I never had any problems with getting my expenses paid. Therefore we should get a high score on financial management." When the next person says, "The people who supply our outside clinics often complain that it takes 4 months to get a small bill paid from the central office!" the participants need to deal with both pieces of information. These ideas are not in competition since they may both be correct. Rather, they indicate that the financial management system has its strengths and weaknesses. The group needs to decide on the implications of the additional information for their group assessment, not which observation is correct.

These attributes do distinguish MOST from many other management self-assessment tools. As well, they account for the strong positive feelings many participants report about the exercise as a personal experience. On the other hand, as we learn from the summary of the four cases, a good workshop experience does not necessarily translate into an effective action plan and improved future performance. Chapter 2 draws on the case studies of MOST experience in four countries; Bolivia, Brazil, Haiti, and Nicaragua. Each setting is different but all used MOST at different points in their overall organizational development. While only suggestive, the lessons from these MOST experiences should help improve the tool and, as well, help place realistic expectations on the process.

Chapter 2

1   Findings from the Case Studies

This chapter draws on the main findings from the four case studies of MOST experience. It links that experience to key issues that can affect the ways that MOST can be used and, as well, affect the outcomes of the MOST experience. Since its initial development, MOST has been applied in different settings and in support of different objectives. The selected case studies are not a statistical sample of MOST experiences. Rather, they describe MOST application(s) for four settings that differ in many important ways. By drawing on diverse experiences, we hope to identify ways to improve the tool and to develop materials that can support the process more effectively.

Information for each of the case studies was derived from written records, staff interviews, and a series of focus group meetings with staff of the organizations who participated in the planning, implementation, and/or follow up of the MOST activities. The focus group meetings followed a structured format and were transcribed to support more extensive review. In most cases, the interviews occurred well after the MOST experience but each focused on the same general set of themes. Based on these themes, each of the case studies loosely followed a similar format but with differences that reflect the scale and nature of the organizations participating in this review.

The four settings reflect many differences that can affect the use and impact of MOST.

Setting	Description
Combase (Bolivia)	Faith-based Service delivery organization-operates six primary care units and one secondary care hospital. Has been dealing with significant financial problems related to poor quality controls and, more recently, high turnover of Directors. MOST exercise was first step in a commitment to provide technical support for improved management and to support the development of a Strategic Plan in the following year.
Profamilia (Nicaragua)	IPPF affiliate-many quality and management shortcomings. Much turnover in leadership. At one point, without a Director for six months. Mid-term assessment identified many problems. New Director wanted to use MOST to bring staff from all levels of the organization to develop new commitment to institutional change.
HS2004 (Haiti)	Project designed to provide service delivery support through a network of NGO providers who receive operating funds and technical support from the project. Levels of support differ considerably among the NGOs. Project also provides technical support for improved management and operations. Some NGOs in the network (those with better management) are eligible for performance-based funding in

	which the NGO's meeting target goals for coverage, etc. can receive a bonus payment equal to 5% while poor performance can result in up to 5% reduction. NGOs participating in the performance-based funding also get greater management control over resources. As part of this effort, NGOs in the program will carry out MOST exercises as part of action plan development
National HIV/AIDS program (Brazil)	MSH provides management support for National STI/AIDS program focused on four target states and six target municipalities. MOST (renamed APROGE in Brazil) was used to identify priority areas and to develop action plans for program improvement. In this setting, MOST was repeated periodically to assess progress and possible changes in the program's action. Because the target organization is a program incorporated in public organizational structures, the challenge of setting the boundaries for participation, etc. required a different perspective.

Each of the case studies provided a rich and varied set of responses. Although not rigidly followed, each of the cases focus on a similar set of issues ranging from the decision to use MOST and expected outcomes, determination of the participants and their preparation, elements of the MOST process (selection of indicators, action plan development), follow-up experience. This chapter summarizes the main observations and their implications for other potential MOST users. The following chapter explores a number of more general MOST related issues and makes recommendations for improving the process and its application.

2.1 Decision to use MOST

In every case, the use of MOST was generated by MSH staff working with the organizations. However, to be effective as a self-assessment tool, both the organizations and the participants need to understand the process and have realistic expectations about MOST, its strengths and its limitations whether it is used as a first step in a process of management improvement or as a periodic assessment tool within the overall operations of the organization..

In the case of COMBASE, the MOST exercise initiated the MSH technical support activities. The most evident problems related to financial limitations and the Mission wanted MSH to emphasize those issues. However, it was argued that the MOST exercise was a better starting point for developing a technical support process. MOST was used to identify priorities and to develop a better sense of management and its importance for achieving performance objectives. The MOST exercise was organized by the Director's office and the MSH consultants. Some participants in the focus groups noted that they did not participate in the decision to use MOST nor in the selection of participants. However, they did acknowledge that there was a good mix from across all levels of the organization.

Similarly in Profamilia, the arrangements were carried out by the office of the Executive Director and MSH consultants. The timing and importance of the MOST workshop was affected by an increase in responsibilities and changed priorities generated in response to Hurricane Mitch. It was felt that the organization needed to assess more clearly its management capacity and identify strategies to improve. The MOST exercise was incorporated into an already ongoing process of technical support.

In Haiti, MOST already had a history in the HS2000 project. During the first phase of the project, a few members of the training staff were trained as facilitators and MOST exercises were carried out with 11 institutions, 9 NGOs and 2 public clinics. With the modifications made as part of the HS2004, the emphasis was wholly focused on building a network of NGO services providers with the ability to manage resources with little or no technical support. [3] The new Project strategy is to focus on the use of incentive payments for those organizations that demonstrate the capacity to meet the service delivery goals more effectively and efficiently. For these members of the HS2004 network, service delivery funds will depend on performance as measured by meeting targets of services and impacts. The NGOs participating or intending to participate in the incentive payment program are required to carry out MOST exercises to develop their initial management development action plans.

In Brazil, the decision to use MOST (renamed APROGE) was a result of being in the right place at the right time. MSH was, at the time, a subcontractor to FHI to implement the Management Component of the project. (At the present, the MSH activities for strengthening management of the HIV/AIDS program are implemented through a direct "buy-in" from USAID and implemented through MSH do Brasil.) The MSH staff in Brazil were familiar with MOST and its utility for broadening participation in the assessment process and subsequent planning activities. In particular, it responded to the need of the Brazilian STI/HIV program to strengthen management capability of the STI/AIDS program in states and municipalities within the context of decentralization and participatory planning. The team spent much time working with a representative of Brazil's National Coordination of STI/AIDS and representatives from programs in the states and municipalities to make sure that MOST could be applied to a program (as opposed to an organization) and that the translation was consistent and understandable. Pilot tests were than implemented in two different settings and some modifications to the instrument were made. In fact, very few changes were made, mostly in the language of the instrument. No changes were made in the general structure of the exercise.

As noted earlier, the decision to use MOST was made in different ways and, as well, for different purposes In the case of COMBASE and Profamilia, the decisions were made essentially by organizational leadership and the MSH consultants who were familiar with the tool. In both cases, a single organization with serious performance problems and a

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[3] In many ways, this decision reflected a more realistic notion of organizational sustainability in a poor country. In a setting like Haiti, there is little likelihood that NGO service providers could generate adequate resources from the people they serve. However, having organizations that are sufficiently well managed and efficiently operated to be able to take donor funds directly could greatly increase the effectiveness of donor spending. The sustainable organizations would be the better managed ones.

commitment for technical support was involved and follow-up of the MOST experience was built-in as part of setting technical support priorities. In the case of Haiti, there was a network of organizations, all of which needed to recognize the value of using MOST, and a technical support program that also provided resources for the service delivery activities of the individual NGO providers. In this case, a considerable effort was made to familiarize all of the NGOs with MOST and to have its use validated by pilot demonstration by a few of the NGOs in the network. Implementing MOST was a network decision and required a much broader effort to familiarize the NGOs in the network with the process and its potential contribution to planning and performance improvement.

In Brazil, the implementation of MOST was an activity with wide participation. The original selection of sites for implementation was done by USAID with participation of FHI, MSH, and the National Coordination. These target states and municipalities were visited by the planning team and MOST was presented. The decision to participate was often made at higher levels, such as the state Health Secretary or the National Coordination of the STI/AIDS program. Nevertheless, the ultimate scale of application and the diversity of interests in the STI/AIDS programs led to a more participatory process in developing the MOST strategy and an initial intention to proliferate the use of MOST throughout the system down to districts.

A working group from the selected sites was organized and, working with the consultant, took responsibility for translating the instrument and the Guide and making sure that the language was consistent with local usage. As a result, a few changes were made in the specifics; name was changed to APROGE (Self Assessment of Management Processes) [4], the definition of "organization" was added to recognize that it includes "programs" as well as institutions, and a specific component for "Objectives" was added. No changes in the basic focus or design of the process were made. Because of the eventual scale of the program and its inherent political consequences, there was widespread participation in all of the processes leading to implementation. It was further decided that the participating state and municipal STI/AIDS programs would provide financial support for all local costs with MSH providing technical assistance only. This level of involvement in developing the workshops reflects the nature of the program and the degree to which it operates within a broader governmental structure. Participation in the design of the workshops developed a sense of "ownership" of the process and, as well, the active marketing of participation was carried out within the program. **However, once a program unit had established its management status, the longer term efforts were directed toward strategic planning, an activity more closely linked to program's performance**

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[4] The change was made because the word "sustainability" is highly associated with the idea of financial sustainability; revenue generation, etc, .and was likely to generate false expectations from the MOST. In M&L, we have used a wider view of sustainability with good management being essential to future performance (Sustainability). A better managed organization is a more sustainable one. MOST was designed to support assessment of the current management capacity and its implication for future performance.

2.2. Context issues and the introduction of MOST

As noted earlier, MOST was seen as an activity that could address the organizations' needs at that moment, even though the organizations were quite different. Although the activity (MOST) is the same, the precipitating events within the organizations, the level and commitment for technical support and, therefore, the expectations were quite different.

COMBASE has been providing services in the Cochabamba area of Bolivia since 1964. Growing demand and shrinking donor funds were putting more pressure on the organization and frequent changes in leadership (and high overall turnover) was making its performance problems more limiting. The technical assistance provided by MSH was to strengthen management systems and increase their ability to generate additional revenues. The objective was to use MOST as a way of making the group more cohesive and aware of the kinds of changes that would be necessary in the foreseeable future. Here, the MOST was used to set the stage and identify priorities for technical support at the beginning of its technical assistance relationship to MSH. Profamilia was an organization of long standing but which had in recent years been unable to develop an effective leadership or to meet consistently operating standards for quality and overall performance. It has seen considerable turnover in directors, one staying only 2 weeks. For one six month period, they were without a Director. When MOST was implemented, Profamilia had been receiving technical support for management improvement. It had a relatively new Director who recognized the potential of MOST to provide the basis for a new start. The objective of MOST was to build a collective understanding of the management challenge and to develop an action plan to set priorities for technical assistance and organizational development.

In Haiti, the participating NGOs were engaged in a process of institutional development that would lead to greater operational independence and funding for the organizations that were able to improve their efficiency of operations and the effectiveness of their services. MOST was seen as an instrument that could help the organizations identify areas of management that were weak and develop action plans to improve them. The earlier MOST experience, the self-assessment emphasis, and the application of MOST by four of the stronger organizations in the HS2004 network made the requirement to use MOST for the NGOs participating in the Incentive Payment process considerably less threatening. This experience reinforced the collaborative relationship between the NGOs and the HS2004 Project

For Brazil, the situation was considerably more complex. The STI/AIDS program was nation-wide and the objective was to strengthen the ability of the states and municipalities to improve the health system responses to a growing prevalence of this disease. Although the program had received funds, it still had to develop, within the broader public sector health programs and institutions, strategies for improved services and higher priority for services to the growing population at risk. After the states and the National Commission had agreed to participate, the MSH team visited each program and briefed identified participants on MOST and left materials for review. The interviewed

participants indicated that all of the participants had fairly clear expectations that were reinforced through the actual experience

2.3.   Adaptation of the tool and the process.

In general, all of the MOST exercises followed the same general structure;

1. discussion of the key management components,
2. use of instrument by individuals to provide initial scores and indicators ,
3. small group work to produce a score and indicator that reflects the entire group,
4. a plenary to develop a final set of indicators that, in the opinion of all of the participants is indicative of the current level of performance
5. Specification of new indicators that would reflect improvement in the component and
6. An Action Plan for generating the identified improvements

In Haiti and Brazil (and Mozambique) the translations were reviewed locally to make sure that the language was clear and consistent with local usage. In fact, while Haiti used French for the documents and the instrument, the actual workshops frequently used Creole.

In Brazil, they implemented MOST in two sites as a pilot project. As noted earlier, they changed the name to reflect the focus on management and to eliminate the sustainability reference since, to most participants, sustainability meant primarily financial sustainability rather than organizational and program sustainability. As a result of the pilot studies, they added a dinner meeting the evening before to provide extra time to introduce key concepts and planning methodology and to begin the team-building exercise. They also added a management component, Objectives, because most of the participants were familiar working with this component[5]. Another "modification" was to take each management component in plenary to identify the current indicators and then address the target indicator for that component rather than treat the current assessment for all components and then shift to the set of targets.[6] In other respects, the APROGE sessions followed the general structure noted above.

2.4. Implementing the process

2.4.1. Participation

In the original development of MOST, it was assumed that, to be effective, the participants needed to represent a full range of staff. MOST provides a context where

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[5] This component, in principle, provided a link between the MOST management characteristics and organizational performance priorities although there is little reference to its impact in the case..

[6] In many MOST implementations the groups have chosen to integrate the process of building the current indicator and identifying the target indicator at the same time. However, that often results in a longer plenary session since the initial work on target indicators can be done in small groups. .

each set of views of the organization are equally contributory to the development of a common understanding of how the organization works and how it could improve. This common view needs to be both widely based on operating realities only some of which are evident to each individual. The MOST exercise is a means for pooling knowledge and processing it in ways that can identify opportunities for improved performance. A wide range of participation is essential.

In general, the MOST exercises were carried out with a wide range of participation. Many of the participants indicated that they were not informed of the criteria for participation or involved in the selection process. Nevertheless, they reported that the participants represented a wide range of staff and brought to the MOST exercise a full range of organizational experience.

Participants in the COMBASE MOST felt that there was a good cross-section of the organization, including a number of department heads and the "doorman." In general, they found the mix quite effective in drawing on a wide range of infrequently shared information and experience. Some respondents noted, however, that the groups should be smaller and include more decision makers. The experience in Profamilia was similar, with participants not involved in the selection process but feeling that the criteria used resulted in a strong and effective participation. Here, the comments indicate a desire to involve a greater number of participants to share the experience of openness and information sharing.

One issue noted in a few of the case studies was the limited participation of senior management. Although the early MOST workshops typically included the Director and, on occasion, Board members, few of these were included in the workshops documented here. In Haiti, relatively few top-level managers participated although, for a few institutions, the Director and senior staff were all full-time participants. Only one MOST included a board member and in two cases, top managers only participated in the opening and closing of the workshop. The cases for COMBASE and Profamilia indicate that the participants were selected by the Director working with the MSH consultant. In general, they reported satisfaction with the diversity and the level of open participation. For many, this was a rare opportunity to listen and be listened to by such a wide range of colleagues.

The experience in Brazil is quite different. The workshops were actively "marketed" as part of the development of the program. Participants were seen as "representatives" of their state or municipal programs. Multiple rounds of APROGE were organized to give the widest range of opportunity for people working in the State and municipal STI/AIDS programs to participate. After the initial rounds, the participants were mostly selected to "represent" the participating organizational unit.

2.4.2. Facilitation

All of the cases emphasized the importance of good facilitation. In particular, they cited commitment to the process and the ability to help the groups develop a consensus on the

indicators and scoring without too much conflict. In the early development of MOST, there had been much discussion about the impact of using persons in the system as facilitators and the earlier strategies assumed a neutral outside facilitator. In fact, for the majority of MOST exercises, the facilitators were MSH or project staff who were familiar with MOST and who had, in some cases, actual MOST facilitation experience and/or training. Although the facilitators did not, as a rule, provide substantive inputs to the process, many participants noted the importance for facilitators, in addition to understanding the management processes that guide the MOST, to know the organization and the health system and help them understand the process in terms of their own organization.

In Haiti, all of the facilitators were project technical staff who had participated in a facilitator's training workshop and had ongoing relationships with the NGOs. Although 16 people were trained, the facilitation was carried out by 4 or 5 key staff (including the financial Director of the project) known to most of the participants. In Nicaragua, the key facilitator was an MSH staff person who was working with Profamilia on its overall management process and had experience in applying MOST to other similar organizations. In Brazil, a consultant had been directly hired to work with the STI/AIDS program to develop the MOST application for the Program. This consultant, together with two experienced MSH staff, facilitated the workshops and, as well helped to "market" the tool to the different settings of the Program.

Facilitators are also responsible for keeping the MOST on schedule. However, the process of indicator development is quite intense, particularly since the objective is to develop consensus that the chosen indicator reflects the actual status of the component. The plenary sessions following the small groups are always hard to facilitate but this process is essential in that it is where the knowledge pooling becomes collective. In some cases, participants noted that their inability to complete the Action Plan reflected that "The facilitators prioritized the participation over the completion of the Agenda. The Plan of Action was not prioritized." On the other hand, the Brazil strategy was to start with a dinner-working meeting the night before at which key concepts were discussed and participants got a "head start" on the process of understanding the notion of "indicators."

2.4.3. Developing the Indicators

The process of developing the indicators is a critical element of MOST. It is this process that gives the general attributes of management development their organizational specificity. The process occurs in three stages. In the individual process, there will be many areas where the participant may feel s/he has no knowledge. (The individual scoring and indicator exercise occurs right after the facilitators have "walked" the group through the MOST instrument.) Often, the individuals will not score all of the components nor develop real indicators that don't just repeat the characteristics provided in the instrument. It is in the small groups that the process really begins. Almost all of the participants noted the difficulty of this process, partly because of different perspectives but mostly because it was difficult to find an observable indicator that

reflected adequately the level of performance. In one group, they started by looking for indicators first and then, used the indicator to establish the stage.

Participants also noted the ability of the facilitator to keep the participants focused on the indicators exercises and to help the groups understand the difference between the reference characteristics and "indicators," a key activity of MOST. Because the groups are small, the facilitators and other resource persons need to attend to groups having difficulty without actually intervening in the process. The plenary sessions to develop a single consensual indicator need to work with the small group outputs. These sessions are a major facilitator's challenge.

In general, respondents pointed out the difficulty of the process. While some suggested making it easier by providing more guidance, even possibly sample indicators to choose from, most of the comments reflect the view that this part of MOST is the most rewarding and also the most difficult. Many noted that it opened up the general level of communication among diverse staff of the organization in ways that had not been part of their work experience. (This is another good reason to have senior management well represented in the group.)

It is recognized that the word, "indicators" is used in a particular way in MOST. The indicators describe the current status of one element of the component. They are used as a base from which to identify (target) indicators that, if achieved, would represent _____ improvement in the component. At this point, the scale ranking is no longer operational since many improvements can be made within the current scale position. Rather, the groups will have identified current circumstances for each component as represented by the indicator and identified target indicators that would represent improvement. These improvement indicators become the targets of the Action Plan, the final product of the MOST workshop.

[handwritten margin note: No! If you are # X, that means you meet "all" criteria]

2.4.4. Action plan development

Action Plan development is a key product of the MOST workshop, first because it specifies actions to be carried out after the MOST exercise and second, because it is the vehicle for extending the results of MOST to the entire staff, not just the participants. Nevertheless, the four cases present very different Action Plan experiences and help identify elements that could make this part of the exercise more effective..

In the case of COMBASE, an Action Plan was developed that emphasized four key systems; Organizational Planning, Human Resources Development, Financial Management, and Revenue generation. A number of factors limited its realization. Shortly after the MOST, the Executive Director left for reasons not shared with the staff. During the next five months, there was no Director and then an Interim Director. A four person technical team was given the responsibility for providing follow up for the Action Plan. However, since that group had neither authority nor support from the new Director, little direct follow up came from this process. Rather, the attention of the organization was turned to developing their annual operating plan. Persons who were interviewed

noted that some actions identified in the MOST were incorporated into their annual plan but that was not the result of a consistent post-MOST strategy.

In the case of Profamilia, the Action Plan was not fully completed during the MOST workshop. Although the process was started, the group ran out of time. Small groups were formed to develop individual plans and these plans were brought to a plenary session for integration into an organizational Action Plan. However, by this time, many of the participants had left, leaving the Action Plan task to a small group remaining. When time ran short, the Director and senior management decided that a small group of managers would complete the Plan later. They were to produce an Action Plan for each management component identified as a priority. The plan would include implementers assigned, a timeframe, and the indicators. Although well-intended, interviewees noted that at the top levels of management, there was little real institutional commitment to prepare the plan and no one in senior management wanted to be responsible for its completion and implementation.

In Profamilia, as in COMBASE, the organization was undergoing many changes in leadership and operations with changes in Directors and, as well, on the makeup of the Board. As one respondent noted, "… there was a commitment to implement the Workshop agreements among the participants, but not at the institutional level." As a result, there was little reference to MOST after the workshop was over. However, they also reported that a few of the MOST-identified changes were implemented over time stimulated by the MSH consultant. In particular, improvements were made in the human resources system, financial analysis, and supervision, all areas identified as high priority in the MOST. Nevertheless, the absence of a clear institutional commitment was a limitation not easily offset.

In the case of Haiti, the Action Plans were the major "product" of the MOST workshops. All of the workshops produced Action Plans although they differed in quality and priority. The case study notes that follow-up on the Action Plan was included as part of the Network's ongoing monitoring. They reported that the major area of post MOST action was related to Mission, in part because the targets typically could be achieved in a relatively short time and, as well, because it was the first component addressed in the workshop. After Mission, priority shifted to systems where the time frame of implementation was typically longer and, as well, often requiring technical support. Overall, the results of MOST were reflected in the overall plans for the institution and, as well, served to assist in establishing priorities for technical support.

In Brazil, all of the programs produced action plans. In some cases, programs actually participated in a sequence of workshops. The recurrent workshops provided a time frame within which action plans needed to be implemented and reviewed at the next APROGE workshop. In fact, however, participants reported that they only looked at the action plans when they were at the next APROGE workshop. For most of the focus groups, the pressures of work and the lack of time to assess and plan made attention to the APROGE identified actions relatively rare. However, when they reviewed the program's activities

many of the priorities identified in APROGE workshops were actually being implemented.

Overall, only the larger, multi-institutional project in Haiti made direct use of the Action Plans produced as part of the MOST. In the case of COMBASE and Profamilia, the pressure of changes in leadership and uncertainty of operating priorities made it difficult to provide priority for the MOST action plan elements. In the case of Brazil, and to some extent, Haiti, the interest in MOST was shifted to a strategic planning priority more directly linked to performance. **In general, MOST is focused on identifying management priorities which are often ignored in other institutional planning efforts. On the other hand, MOST is not designed to be a full planning activity.** To be most effective, it needs to be implemented within a system where planning and operational oversight can draw on MOST outputs without disconnecting them from the ongoing activities and priorities of the organization.

2.5. Perceived consequences and post-MOST experiences.

All of the case studies documented the impacts of the MOST experience in terms of planned and unplanned impacts. In the case of COMBASE, the workshop did not produce final action plans although the process did identify needed actions with regard to improvement. Respondents noted that four specific areas for improvement were identified as high priority. Two of the priority areas, human resources management and organizational planning, were incorporated into the annual operating plan. It was noted that this gave the organization the basis for institutional follow-up that MOST did not have. In the area of Human Resources, a functions manual was produced, the roles and responsibilities of most positions were described, and delegations of authority were specified.

The MOST also resulted in tangible improvements in planning by providing an experience in planning that did not just focus on donor's priorities. Respondents noted that, prior to MOST, planning was only done in response to funders' requests. MOST provided a first experience in planning focused on the organization. The workshop also resulted in changes in the organizational mission and vision that now incorporate specific references to sustainability objectives.

Respondents also noted that the MOST workshop also provided an experience in information sharing not previously experienced. Prior to MOST, staff had "operated in a void of information and communication." The impact was limited, however, by the failure to document and share the MOST experience with staff who had not participated in the exercise.

In many ways, the Profamilia experience was quite similar. Although there was no Action Plan against which to measure post-MOST activities, both strengthening of the Human Resources component and updating of the Profamilia institutional vision and mission were specifically included in the recommendation and priorities in the workshop proceedings. In the case of Profamilia, respondents also noted that MOST generated

many responses at the regional level. Participants from at least three clinics applied portions of the MOST tool to their clinic settings. This included developing indicators to reflect clinic priorities, restructuring some personnel to improve performance, and wider sharing and promoting of their mission with clients and staff.

Among the unanticipated results was a broadened understanding of the institution and how it works for participants. It was described as "an opportunity to improve contact and communication between the regional and central levels." Although this outcome has been difficult to sustain, participation in the workshop improved the confidence and capacity of clinic managers and many participants noted that the workshop gave them problem-solving skill that are continuously in use. Overall, however, these impacts wane without reinforcement that has been difficult to maintain in the context of the organization's other problems.

In Haiti, MOST was used as a means to set short and medium term priorities for improvements in management. Action plans are periodically reviewed and used to track changes. Participants strongly supported the self-assessment focus of MOST and noted it was more convincing and efficient than the external evaluation made earlier. They also reported that the self-assessment "is a collective learning opportunity where participants discover what they know and don't know about the organization for which they work." In some cases, during the workshop problems are identified that can respond to immediate change but, in every case, the collective assessment is transparent and the opportunities for change more readily identified.

All participants emphasized the workshop's influence on problem-solving skills. "The MOST process offers an apprenticeship in the capacity to reveal and recognize institutional weaknesses that are not always easy to discern through the more conventional approaches." The Haiti case study notes that "MOST involves a process of making managerial issues explicit, permitting staff to adopt a more objective stance toward what works and what does not by bringing issues out of isolated subjectivity into a sphere of collective problem-solving. On the negative side, it also noted a "lack of clarity" (does this mean commitment?) concerning follow-up technical support. On the one hand, the process indicated standards to be attained and improvements to be made. On the other hand, participants felt they had insufficient guidelines to implement the identified improvements.

In Brazil, the timing of the APROGE workshops generated an opportunity for broader impacts. The workshop was the first time projects participated in a systematic management assessment and planning process. Participants could identify no other experiences or management systems for planning. Since that time, every state is required to have a strategic plan. Participants reported that the plans from states that had had the APROGE workshops were superior to the other plans submitted. In fact, some held that the strategic plan requirement was a result of the APROGE process. Ten programs developed missions, objectives, and action plans during the APROGE I. Workshop. Nine programs did it twice and four programs, three times. Most participants said that the most important outcome was the planning process and the plans it produced. Particularly

for those who participated in more than a single workshop, it was possible to see real improvements.

The other aspect with longer term impacts was the specification of the mission. In particular, for a program such as STI/AIDS, a clear mission statement was found to be quite important and participants indicated they referred to it regularly. Participants also noted the improvement in problem-solving generated by the APROGE experience. A representative of the Mental Health department participated in one workshop because the DMH often works with the STI/AIDS program. As a result, the Mental Health department in Santos has decided to implement APROGE for its own planning.

Some participants noted that the process of consensus development, although atypical, could still generate conflicts. They noted that the facilitators should be experienced in this area, even though the emphasis is on reaching consensus through knowledge pooling rather than through choosing the "most believable evidence."

None of the four programs in the final APROGE III intends to continue to use APROGE at their level but would consider using it to improve managerial capacity of priority municipalities and districts after they develop action plans. On the other hand, the municipality of Salvador is planning to conduct APROGE workshops to strengthen the management capability of districts.

In most cases, this reflects a shift toward broader strategic planning. This was seen as a natural outcome of the APROGE experience. Although many indicated that they only look at the action plan developed in the APROGE workshops when the follow-up exercises are held, they are surprised at the number of APROGE priorities that have actually been addressed and implemented. The Brazil cases identify two additional issues which need to be explored. Of most importance is the difficulty of linking impacts to the APROGE intervention and, consequently, the difficulty of determining the cost-effectiveness of the intervention. In Brazil, additional complexity is added by the program decision to use multiple APROGEs to track progress. Originally, the intention was to do the workshop only once to identify priority technical support activities.

This issue may have been overtaken by events as the program implements its strategic planning activities. The MOST emphasis is specifically on management. The strategic plan manual does not include a management component. As a result, key elements of APROGE could be added to the strategic plan protocols. All of the above reinforces the need for on-going monitoring and follow up, imposing costs on the programs that they may not be able to bear. They suggest working within institutions that already have a mandate for providing technical assistance to state and municipal programs.

2.6. Strategic observations.

Perhaps the strongest of the themes identified in the four case studies is that MOST can have only limited organizational impact when it is implemented as a stand-alone exercise and that, by itself, it cannot encompass the range of activities necessary to integrate

management directly into performance improvement. On the other hand, it seems to have had real impacts on the participants understanding of the organization as a whole and their recognition of what constitutes management and how it can be improved.

From the first observation above, it is clear that only some aspects of action plan fulfillment can be used as a measure of MOST impact. To the extent that the MOST perspective helps to shape and reinforce effective strategic planning, it may be the right instrument to establish a basis for strategic planning. At the least, strategic plans often fail to consider the management support that is required to make the plans effective. Having a MOST/APROGE experience may reinforce staff awareness of the interrelationships.

A second observation is that expectations for MOST cannot be appropriately developed if they don't recognize the overall dynamic of the organization and the context in which it operates. In both COMBASE and Profamilia, serious weaknesses in staffing and leadership made effective action difficult. Staff needs to work in a context of commitment. When leadership and direction are unstable, with high turnover and new Directions, staff tends to focus on "just doing the job." (and staying out of trouble!) until the current Director has taken a position about organizational objectives and the strategies for addressing them. In some cases, new Directors always object to the strategies of the previous Director. In these cases, it is hard to identify independent MOST impacts beyond those accruing personally to participants. The MOST experience for participants, however, can't substitute for the managerial outputs and their impacts such as real changes in operating systems, better financial oversight,

Chapter 3

2   Generalizations and Recommendations on Using MOST

This chapter explores the implications of the documented experience of the four MOST applications for the use and improvement of MOST. As noted earlier, four experiences are examples, not a generalizable sample. Nevertheless, they point out some clear areas where we might strengthen the process by providing better guidance for users and for facilitators.

In general, since its introduction, MSH staff have found MOST relatively easy to use and, of even more importance, a way to broaden the understanding of management on the part of a wide range of participants. Participants have liked the process as a true self-assessment, not an evaluation with criteria imposed from outside. It has been demonstrated to be highly adaptable, serving institutional needs that range from exploratory self-assessment to implementation of strategies for improvement. In particular, MOST has shown itself to be low risk, generating the knowledge pooling and management improvement priorities with little risk to the participants. In all of the cases, respondents liked much about the exercise, even when many of the specific future actions got lost to higher priorities for institutional development and/or changes in leadership.

These factors make it important to recognize that MOST also has limitations, some of which could be minimized if they were recognized early and directly addressed in MOST applications.

3.1. General Recommendations

3.1.1. Integrating MOST results into overall organizational Planning. (Improving Management Capacity is not enough.)

Perhaps the most essential observation is that MOST is a self-assessment tool for identifying the level of development of key management components based on the collective knowledge and experience of the participants. It is not a tool for operational planning which would focus more on the elements of organizational activities that impact directly on performance. Nor is it a tool for assessing specific management components in depth. (This latter issue is being addressed through the development of system assessment tools that incorporate more technical criteria and require more in-depth assessment)

Preparation Phase— Facilitato to discuss with ED.

One of MOST's strengths is the ability to draw from a wide range of participants, consistent assessments of management development and opportunities for improvement. For longer term impacts, these results need to be linked more directly to the performance goals of the organization as identified in Strategic Plans and annual workplans. These organizational strategies need to incorporate the management assessments from MOST and, as well, incorporate implementation of the MOST generated action plans.

Recommendation: The introduction of MOST needs to be based on a clear sense of the overall experience and objectives of the organization. Although MOST can be implemented as a stand-alone activity or a first stage in organizational development, users need to recognize the need to connect MOST to the core planning for performance. In settings where broader planning activities are in place, the potential of MOST and the expectations of all the stakeholders need to be aligned and participants fully aware of the connections through inception meetings, staff orientations, and management participation.. This assessment should be part of the MOST implementation process. Even when MOST is used to start a new technical support effort, it needs to be connected operationally to the collective commitments of the participants to organizational performance improvement even if they are not yet in place or in the process of significant change. Operationally, the action plans should emphasize these linkages and include activities that demonstrate the connections.

> In the case of Haiti, operational plans were already in place, resources were essentially obligated, and the major constraints on performance were the ability of the organizations in the networks to manage resources effectively. MOST was integrated into the network operations to provide an additional support for meeting service delivery performance goals and to reinforce the group focus and commitment. In this setting, the performance targets are clear for each of the NGOs in the network. MOST is just one more tool for organizational self-development. For operational purposes, the HS2004 project has specified in more technical detail a minimum management package for the assessment of key management systems (financing, human resources development, logistic management, and information management).

3.1.2. Participant issues

Because the information used to assess the level of management development comes from the participants, it is important that they form a critical mass sufficient to represent all levels of the institution. In a large organization, this may require an overly large number of participants yet the structure of MOST may preclude that option. In MOST, the time necessary to develop the indicators and the action plan is heavily linked to the size of the group or, more correctly, the number of small groups. The time in plenary to integrate the material from small groups is directly related to their number. Although MOST has been carried out with small groups of 3-5, five is an outer limit with smaller groups preferable. Participants regularly note that the time necessary to build the collective positions is well spent but, often, prevents adequate attention to Action Plan development.

1. Where MOST is to be repeated periodically (Haiti, Brazil), efforts can be made to support the widest range of participation over time. Where MOST is an initial, possible one-time, activity, as in COMBASE or Profamilia, the diversity priority is the critical one. In these cases, participants were selected by the Director and the MSH consultants. Respondents reported good diversity in terms of parts of the

organization but noted the relatively low participation of senior management. It is essential that senior management be included in the participants. In the cases, there were wide differences among the organizations with only a few including Directors and board members. In some cases, the Directors came only for the opening and closing sessions, thereby separating themselves from the MOST process. Although the "reason" was to avoid inhibiting the staff, MOST is structured to combine participants in ways that encourage full participation of all.

Because of the way that MOST is structured, lack of senior staff participation greatly compromises the potential of the activity.

Recommendations:

Participants must be selected from across the organization. Where there are multiple sites, some participants should come from those other locations. They should be selected by the Director and, if appropriate, MSH, and assigned to this activity. Participation in MOST should not be voluntary.

Preparation Phase - Facilitator

In every case, the active participation of Senior Management is essential. Otherwise, the results of the process do little to improve the organizational knowledge of senior leadership nor demonstrate commitment to the management development initiatives in the Action Plan

3.1.3. Sharing results beyond the participants.

MOST has the capacity to provide, at the level of the individual participants, a valid and productive organizational experience and an expanded understanding of how the organization works and each participant's potential contribution to organizational performance. The ability to draw on this experience is limited in two ways. Turnover of employees will erode the base of participants over time. In some cases, more than half of the participants had left between the MOST workshop and the case study interviews. Another challenge, equally important, is how the MOST experience can be shared by other members of the staff who did not participate in MOST and/or who joined the organization after the MOST exercise. For larger organizations, only a small proportion of the staff will be able to participate

In every case, the issue of how to share the results of MOST with the rest of the organization remains. At a minimum, it means that the MOST exercise needs to be well documented and widely shared through informal as well as formal processes. For the products, the Action Plan needs to be circulated and, as well, require actions on the part of some staff not participating in the MOST. It also depends on the MOST action plan getting incorporated in the organization's overall planning/implementation efforts and/or the action plan requiring actions of individuals not part of the MOST exercise. (This issue is related to the question of what materials might be prepared for participants prior to MOST and, as well, its utility for nonparticipants to understand more about the process and its expected outcomes. In this case, the experience in Brazil merit further analysis.

Recommendations: All staff should have sufficient advanced information to assure that they all know what MOST is and have a general sense of the products to expect. The staff should also have a debriefing from senior management and the participants in the workshop shortly after its conclusion.

The action plan should include activities for which some nonparticipants in the MOST will have responsibilities.

3.4. Context Issues

Every MOST implies decisions about the boundaries of the organization for purposes of management assessment. Many are part of larger national organizations. Although most obvious in the public sector, it is equally challenging for the NGOs. In Haiti, some of the participants in the network are regional parts of national organizations. Because of the nature of the network, only the regional organization staff participates in MOST. Within each of the organizations, it is possible to implement MOST for a single service delivery unit, or a hospital that is part of the broader system. In the case of Brazil, the challenge is even greater. Each district can do MOST for itself while at the same time it is part of the regional MOST. What changes is the options and, as well, the mix of participants necessary to establish an appropriate Action Plan.

Recommendation: The boundaries for each MOST need to be clearly specified and consistently applied for identifying appropriate participants and applicable actions for improvement of management.

3.5. Resource requirements for MOST.

One of the important aspects of MOST is the amount of time required for an adequate implementation. Although there have been attempts to shorten the time required, in general, speeding up the process has been quite unsuccessful. As a result, the Action Plan development has often gotten much less attention that it required. The cases all point out the difficulties. The Brazil strategy of starting the evening before is a luxury not available in many cases. On the other hand, both COMBASE and Profamilia had to adapt the Action Plan activities to accommodate the lack of sufficient time within the boundaries of the workshop agenda.

There is little question that MOST needs ample time to develop the consensus indicators and the targets for improvement. Although the time needed is correlated with the size of the group, in general, it takes three full days to move from initial assessments through to the specification of action Plans. Many participants noted the time commitment required and questioned its cost-effectiveness. While this depends on how the MOST products are used, the reality is that MOST is a labor-intensive activity.

Recommendation: MSH should begin to experiment with different formats for MOST which can still take advantage of the essential MOST characteristics. Such

formats could include spreading the activities over a longer time period and adapting the facilitation strategy to accommodate a workshop with modules carried out at different times. (For example, meet for one full day per week/month) What is important is that the format doesn't compromise the knowledge pooling process and the indicator development exercise. Different formats might actually lend themselves to different facilitation strategies including distance learning, etc.

need workshop for flow

3.6. Facilitation issues

The key to successful MOST is the quality and consistency of the facilitators. Since the initial development of the MOST Facilitator's Guide, we have learned much about where the challenges lie and how facilitators can deal with them more effectively. The case studies all indicate that, not only is facilitation an essential component of MOST but that, as well, the participants recognize and respond to the facilitator's support.

Guide written for facilitators

At the present, we are revising the MOST Facilitators' Manual to incorporate what we have learned since the first MOST some years ago. The objective is to provide better training materials, provide more options for facilitators to modify certain aspects of the program to improve its effectiveness and, perhaps, to redistribute the time available for different modules of the workshop, and to revise the background materials on which the facilitators can draw. Those recommendations will be incorporated into the MOST manual revision process.